

## W. B. Yeats' "September 1913" as an Elegy: Generic Deviation

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### Abstract:

A literary work is most often characterised by formal, thematic and stylistic features. The distinction between these is never obvious, though. In a Petrarchan sonnet, for instance, the form is closely tied to the theme (tension in the octet and relief in the sestet). Similarly, the traditional ballad generally tells a tragic story in local history or legend in quatrains where the second and fourth lines usually rhyme. Stylistically, a ballad will tend to use simple language and occasional vivid dialogue. However, throughout history, many literary genres have undergone changes that would often free them from formal constraints, so much so that a modern reader might wonder why W. C. Williams's "This is just to say" should not be taken as prose or Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" as verse. Genre assignment has thus grown increasingly complex, an operation that will need to take into consideration the dynamicity of the creative literary mind and its resistance to submissive alignment with generic standards. In this context, the following paper will consult recent views on genre and genre modelling in an effort to elucidate how W. B. Yeats's "September 1913", by embodying prominent generic features of poetry and elegy, can be read as a model of compound generic deviations. This makes the work a modelled piece that resists generic categorization and testifies to the poet's strategic unwillingness to irretrievably engage with the nationalist cause.

**Keywords:** deviation, elegy, genre, romantic nationalism

## Introduction:

Despite its 1913 original publication in the radical unionist newspaper *The Irish Times*, W. B. Yeats' "September 1913" has often been considered one of the poet's activist pieces, showing, to a considerable degree, what some critics have described as "Yeats' national fervour" (Jeffares, 1980, p. 64). In his "Yeats and Decolonization," Said (1990) even describes Yeats as "a poet of decolonization [struggling] to announce the contours of an "imagined" or ideal community, crystallized not only by its sense of itself but also of its enemy" (p. 86).

This reception was to a large extent fostered by Yeats himself. Feeling the urge, following the 1916 unexpected Easter Rising, to redeem the defeatist undertones inherent in the poem's refrain which admits the death and entombment of Romantic Ireland, Yeats republished the poem in 1916 and 1917 with an appended note that sought to reframe (or re-contextualise) "September 1913" in the new mood of the revived Romantic nationalism with the self-denial and blood-sacrifice it implies.

Such lizard-like quality brings to mind Yeats' theory of masks (Leavitt, 2007, p. 135). According to this theory, the poet will experience the need for some form of sceptic detachment. This detachment is reached when the poet assumes – as Yeats explains in his *Memoirs* – "the mask of some other self" and by so doing "hides from the terrors of judgment" (p. 191). Such urge to assume different masks may well be read in light of what York calls modern poets' tendency to avoid "undue commitment" (York, 1986, p. 21). Accordingly, the poet should see to it that his text be as flexible as possible for it not to bear the brunt of irretrievable position or dramatic engagement.

To show the repercussions of this strategy on the poem's affiliation(s) to the elegy genre and the extent to which manipulation of this genre through incessant deviation has guaranteed the text's adaptability to different contexts, including ones subsequent to its writing, the following analysis will briefly consult the literature on genre theory and measure the piece's alignment with the most salient features of the poem and the elegy genres. Assessing the Irish nationalist question in "September 1913," the article will conclude that the poem could read at will as nationalist, a position very comfortable to the poet of masks in the critical context of the Irish struggle for independence.

## Genre Revisited

It might seem obvious that tackling a work of art from a generic perspective will have to go through assessing how representative of a specific genre the work is. Yet, if knowledge of genre is limited, generic categorisation will be necessarily fuzzy. To reach some consensus whereby genre could be academically handled, some definition of the word should then be adopted. Now, the word genre originates from the Latin word for order, type, class, or category of presentation that shares distinctive and easily identifiable features (Silverblatt, 2007, p. 3). Thus defined, genre would encompass a large array of possible signifieds, even "varieties of language uses" (Chandler, 1997, p. 1). The wide range of fields where genre can hold sway reminds of the kind of problems genre theory has always met: Problems concerning the essence (factual or fictional), taxonomy (finite or infinite), age (everlasting or temporary), sphere (culture-specific or trans-cultural) and nature (descriptive or proscriptive) of the so-called genre (Stam, 2000, p. 14).

However, literary works have always been classified, one has the impression, into different categories. Since Aristotle's *Poetics*, distinctions have, for instance, been made between tragedy, comedy, and the epic (Thorburn, 2005, p. 68). Yet, despite the kind of de facto divisions the world of literary analysis and criticism has made accessible, disagreement between specialists is such that what a theorist calls a genre may be but a mode or a sub-genre to another analyst, which proves Feuer's view (1992) that "a genre is ultimately an abstract conception" (p. 144). Styles, themes, and periods have not managed to be the solid bases of categorisation, either. Hans Robert Jauss (1982) emphasised the pleasure sought and found in reading various genres (p.85) and Fowler (1982) distinguished between kinds and modes by way of eschewing the classicists' evaluative hierarchy of genres (p. 16).

Interpreting genre, Fowler (1982) maintains, the critic should see how "genre operates in at least three ways, corresponding to the logical phases of criticism – construction, interpretation, and evaluation (p. 256). The construction phase will be, in part, the product of historical, biographical and literary contexts, the latter being perhaps best construed in the light of Husserl's "horizon of meaning" (p. 256). All in all, it is difficult to distinguish between genres since these may intersect, overlap or even know modulations. Specific features that characterise a given genre are not necessarily typical of it and unique to it; only their relative standing, combination and functions are distinctive (Neale, 1980, pp. 22–23). Even in the mass media, mixed-genre texts are quite common (Fairclough, 1995, p. 89).

As Chandler (1997) defensibly argues, the striking limitations of the definitional approach to genre led contemporary theorists to adopt the so-called "family resemblances" approach where the theorist would have to illustrate affinities between some of the texts within a genre (p. 3). The approach has been criticized on grounds of partiality when it gets to choosing texts for illustrative purposes (Swales, 1990, p. 51) and the turn of the century theorists favoured an approach regarding the forms and functions of genre as a dynamic process based on permanent negotiation and change (Buckingham, 1993, p. 137) and allowing permeability (Abercrombie, 1996, p. 45).

Additionally, despite the prominence of the Marxist attitude to genre (Chandler, 1997, p. 4) which sees it as a means to position the audience and manipulate their attitude to social reality by reproducing and naturalizing the dominant ideology (Feuer, 1992, p. 145), reader-oriented critics, without negating the ideological side of genres, have managed to underscore the audience's capacity of reading against the grain and even negotiating shared beliefs and values (ibid). More recent critics inspired by Stanley Fish's writing see that reading requires understanding not of what the text shows or means but rather of what it does (Fish, 1980, p. 71). Thus, approaching genre from the vantage point of purpose opened the door for the new pragmatic approach that, in the words of John Swales (1990), accentuates a genre's communicative purposes (p. 46). This aim-oriented approach has attracted semioticians like John Hartley and Katie Wales who emphasised the "intertextual" nature of genre. This same attitude was defended by both Barthes and Derrida who saw that no text could be "genre-less" (Chandler, 1997, p. 6).

In his defence of genre, Chandler (1997) proceeds to compare the traditional Romantic attitude which disdains genre and sees it as a factor hampering authorial creativity to the contemporary vision considering genre a field where creative tension can address and even inflect generic conventions (p. 6). He quotes Sonia Levingstone who contends that

Different genres specify different 'contracts' to be negotiated between the text and the reader... which set up expectations on each side for the form of the communication..., its functions..., its epistemology..., and the communicative frame (e.g. the participants, the power of the viewer, the openness of the text, and the role of the reader). (Livingstone, 1990, qtd. in Chandler, p. 6)

The latest genre studies have therefore all but quit old assumptions that knowledge of genre conventions might result in “a passive consumption” of generic texts. The new stance adopted rather maintains that making sense of texts within genres is an active process of meaning construction.

Such an attitude may be seen as the fruit of elaborate studies on the history and development of genres – basically literary ones – conducted by theorists like Fowler who as early as 1982 wrote:

Every work of literature belongs to at least one genre. Indeed, it is sure to have *a significant generic element*. For genre has quite a different relation to creativity from the one usually supposed, whereby it is little more than a restraint upon spontaneous expression. Rightly understood, it is so far from being a mere curb on expression that it makes *the expressiveness of literary works* possible. *Their relation to the genres they embody is not one of passive membership but of active modulation*. Such modulation *communicates*. And it probably has a communicative value far greater than we can ever be directly aware of. (p. 20; emphasis added)

Genre is then not simply one aspect the text shows, not even a characteristic or feature thereof; it is somehow a frame that binds the text's writing and reception. To Fowler (1989), it is genre that “makes possible the communication of content” (p. 215).

Lately, in his 2008 book on the issue of genre, Whetter insisted on its vital importance in understanding a literary work; he equally criticised the justifications given by proponents of the modernism who wanted “to deracinate genre altogether” (p. 5). Here Whetter (2008) argued that

[The] multiplicity of genre is, however, a strength rather than a weakness and we can solve much of the confusion of genre study by recognizing that pure or unmixed genres are in fact relatively rare ... most genres naturally embrace generic mixtures by containing elements of one or more other genres. (p. 152)

Agreeing with Whetter, Fowler, Fish, and Duff – among others – the analysis to follow will then align with the post-modern valorisation of genre as a concept “signalling not prescription and exclusion but opportunity and common purpose” (Duff, 2000, p. 2). Endeavouring to read “September 1913” in relation to the elegy genre, it will seek to relate the poem's generic deviation to Yeats's poetics of “detached belonging” (Jaoua, 2016, p. 145).

### **“September 1913” as a Poem and Elegy: Generic Deviation**

As the following study endeavours to explicate, Yeats's “September 1913” lends itself to a reading that would negotiate its being an elegy. Having grasped the significant generic elements binding it to the elegy frame, a discussion of the poem's generic affiliation will

follow. In this act of communication with the poem, the reader will have to recognize what the text *does*. The analysis will first attempt to investigate the piece's belonging to the poem, then to the elegy genres. Finally, it will show the extent to which the piece defies classification by deviating from norms typical of the elegy.

### **A Poem?**

Approached from a generic perspective, "September 1913" yields various results (Jaoua, 2017, p. 170). Thus, to read it as a generic text requires a consideration of the extent to which this piece follows conventions typical of the genre assumed. The work is definitely a poem and this is a first frame – a selection of some aspects of a perceived reality to make them more salient (Entman, 1993, p.52) – the text can be perceived through. It is certainly so for it follows distinctive conventions of the poetic genre: It is written by a famous Irish poet. It has a special layout showing successive stanzas of equal length. It also has a title and a rhyme scheme. The four octets of the poem might hint at the importance of number 4 in a text written by Yeats the symbolist (Sarker, 2002, P.57). Such hypothesis gains ground as the reader realizes that the poem follows an alternate rhyme scheme making of each octet the blend of 2 quatrains. An ensuing thematic division of the octet into two parts is then suggested, yet soon discarded owing to the absence of punctuation at the end of the fourth line. The two hypothetical quatrains are thus blended through enjambment, a stylistic device used to defer closure and defy boundaries. Unity then emerges as substitute for division when the reader sees that all middle lines in the octets of the poem are but run-on lines.

Refrain is equally perceived by a poem's reader as an important generic feature. A figure of repetition, the refrain will generally emphasize ideas to be held crucial (*The Spencer Encyclopedia*, p. 561). In this respect, the lexis of the refrain is expected to trigger (a) central theme(s). Words like "dead", "gone", and "grave" activate the semantic fields of death, burial, mourning, and funeral, which best befits the elegy framework. The reader's attention is thus directed to some deceased figure. Who died? When? How? These are ensuing questions that a reader will justifiably ask. The presuppositions in the use of names seem to slyly push the reader to take it for granted that these names refer to people the poet assumes the reader knows. Irish readers of the time are then believed to know John O'Leary, the major Fenian leader, the Irish Romantic nationalist who spent most of his life either in jail or in exile for the sake of the Irish nationalist cause (Deane et al., 2002, p. 83). Such a presupposition could thus bear undertones of blame or reprimand for those who do not know him or even for those who could wonder as to the reason behind mourning him in 1913, six years after his death.

Another form of deviation is notable in the refrain: it does not accomplish any informative function. While seeming to inform, the refrain does not. In fact, throughout the first three octets, "Romantic Ireland" is assumed to have a referent. Yet, who/what is he/she/it? Whoever/whatever the referent, this presumable being is now dead and gone. Endeavouring to check the truth of such a statement, the reader realises that it cannot be logically true that some indefinite entity is dead; the Gricean maxim of quality (Grice, 1975, p. 46) is then flouted owing to the deviation from the referentiality of words. Romantic Ireland is (a concept? an idea? a dream?) given human identity through personification.

Now, if "Romantic" is just an attribute (a qualifier), then it could be dismissed to give way to an alarming statement to the effect that Ireland is dead and gone. The phrase Romantic Ireland Yeats coins in this poem thus acquires the quality of a proper name different from the real Ireland. To attribute the adjective romantic to a country is yet another aspect of deviation. Indeed, as Dworkin (2012) argues, Ireland entered the era of Romanticism following the 1798

rebellion and Romantic writers of the country freed imagination from the manacles of reason. The movement preached idealism at the expense of rationalism and showed admiration of sublime nature and idealisation of folklore and local culture (p. 49).

These features of the Romantic Movement were convenient to the mood of nationalism that characterised the years of the Irish Revolution (ibid). The Yeats of the twentieth century always believed in the unifying impact of Romanticism in Ireland (Powell, 2004, p. 145). The country in 1913 was not yet independent despite the immense sacrifices early nationalists had made. The presumable death of Romantic Ireland the poem proclaims starts, therefore, to read like a pessimistic warning to the Irish believing in Romantic nationalism, or like a desperate avowal of disillusionment with Romantic nationalism in the worldly Ireland of 1913. Yet, Romantic Ireland can be taken as the ideal/ised country for which much blood was shed, the blood of the Irish nationalists the poem will (incontestably?) praise. At this juncture, the reader grows increasingly aware of a complex issue the poem seems to tackle: the death of Romantic nationali(sts?/sm?).

### **An Elegy?**

Doubtless, the prevailing theme of death to which the choice of lexis is inextricably related endows the poem with a sad/elegiac tone, a generic feature of the elegy. Indeed, *the Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, defines elegy as “an elaborately formal lyric poem lamenting the death of a friend or a public figure, or reflecting seriously on a solemn subject” (p. 104). In the refrain, the reference to O’Leary, a landmark of Irish nationalism is neighbored on both sides by lexical items suggesting death. Preceded by “dead” and “gone” and followed by “the grave,” O’Leary’s name is lexically trapped in a death web. Understandably, since O’Leary is the sole human name in the line, the tone of bitter lamentation in the refrain would seem to mourn the death of this nationalist figure. However, it is Romantic Ireland that is said to be dead: “Romantic Ireland is dead and gone,” says the refrain. O’Leary is already in the grave and the deceased Romantic Ireland seems to have joined him, or to have died with him. No one can tell whether Romantic Ireland died the very moment O’Leary did – which might suggest that Romantic Ireland is metonymically connected with O’Leary (i.e the death of O’Leary signified the death of Romantic Ireland, a closely related idea). In this case, the line would mourn O’Leary as representative of Romantic Ireland or mourn Romantic Ireland whose death is closely linked to O’Leary’s since it is with O’Leary that Romantic Ireland is now engraved.

So, even though death which is a characteristic thematic feature of elegiac verse prevails over the poem, the subject mourned in the refrain remains ambiguous: O’Leary? Romantic Ireland? Or both? To this ambiguity is added further ambiguity as the refrain strikingly undergoes a change in the last stanza. “Romantic Ireland is dead and gone/ It’s with O’leary in the grave” – the refrain repeated at the end of the first three stanzas – is substituted in the last stanza by “But let them be, they’re dead and gone/ They’re with O’Leary in the grave.” Some variation in the refrain, though an aspect of deviation, is not necessarily a form of subversion. Yet, if the very subject of the refrain, the subject whose death the refrain proclaims and presumably mourns is the target of this change, then deviation is quite marked and consequential.

Now, this variation in the refrain has established parallelism between the initial subject (Romantic Ireland) and the last one (They). Very remarkably, the two references to the initial subject – first in the nominal form (“Romantic Ireland”), then the pronominal form (“It”) – in the refrain of the first three stanzas are replaced by references to a new subject – now the plural “they” – in a pronominal form. Who then is/are mourned? Romantic Ireland? O’Leary? or they? Or all? And who are “they”? And if this structural parallelism which parallels “Romantic

Ireland” with “they” is meant to give pre-eminence to the new subject (they) whose death is made to parallel/substitute the death of Romantic Ireland, then is this not a way of image mapping? In the last stanza, the reader is obliquely told that “they” are the ones dead and gone and that “they” are with O’Leary in the grave. This structural pattern invites a perception of “they” as substitutes for “Romantic Ireland”: The mental image of “they” is cunningly mapped onto that of “Romantic Ireland.” Here, Romantic Ireland acquires human characteristics, which invites reconsideration of the initial refrain.

“They” happens to be the pronoun most prevalent in all stanzas but the first. Its cataphoric use in the first line of the second octet is later followed by different lexical items meant to disambiguate its referent. First comes the subject “The names that stilled your childish play”, a complex noun phrase that depicts the referent of “they” in a peculiar way; “they” are no people, they are but names. Throughout the stanza, these are portrayed as some unique (stanza 2, line 1), breathtaking (stanza 2, line 2), ethereal creatures (stanza 2, line 3), that were deprived the right to save some leave-taking prayer since the hangman’s rope was spun for them and could not wait.

In the third stanza, the brutal image of execution the second stanza suggests is further reinforced by explicit lexical reference to blood shed (stanza3, line3), and death (stanza3, line4). These expressions echo the “the hangman’s rope was spun” of the second stanza and create what reads like a dreadful atmosphere of assassination and murder. Grief and lamentation for those whose blood was shed emerge as keynotes to this part. Starting from the fourth line, names of outstanding Irish nationalists are enumerated. The three of these died for the Irish cause the way national heroes do. As Ross (2009) argues:

Fitzgerald died of wounds suffered during his arrest as a participant in the rebellion of 1798; Tone committed suicide while imprisoned for his part in the same rebellion, Emmet was executed for his part in the failed insurrection of 1803. (p. 225)

Stylistically, the third octet opens with a six-line rhetorical question which seems to assess the sacrifices of these figures and wonder if their blood sacrifice was really worthwhile.

The answer is implicitly negative: Neither the wild geese - Irish soldiers who were forced to live in exile and fight other wars (Ibid), the nationalists who died in prison (Fitzgerald and Tone), nor even the one publically executed (Emmet) brought about any considerable change, the successive lines suggest. They died and reaped nothing but meagre harvest that cannot compare with what they had given. The sixth line even describes their action as “delirium of the brave”. Again, even though these lines seem to mourn the nationalists mentioned, the label given these acts of sacrifice (“this delirium of the brave”) shows some indefinite attitude. You never know whether to construe the expression as a show of adoration, which the word “brave” communicates, or as a manifestation of discontent with the “foolish” blood sacrifice resulting from excess of zeal (delirium). Here, deviation is clear since while a traditional elegy would embody three stages of loss: grief and lament, praise and adoration, then consolation and solace (Blevins, 2008, p.138), in this special elegy the praise and adoration part is modulated as praise gives way to some latent criticism.

The last stanza opens with a regretful conditional expressing impossibility and imagining the years turned again and the exiles called back. This adds to the mood of melancholy and despair by hypothetically suggesting the ensuing reaction of the addressee. A shallow, ungrateful

response would come from the worldly addressee who would not believe the nationalists' act unworldly and would therefore read it as a crazy feat done to win some pretty woman's favours. Again, the sixth line seems to seek assessment and the reference to weighing suggests the literal weighing of commercially-minded merchants who would seek material profit as they weigh commodity. The image, while starkly contrasting with that of the generous nationalists, reminds the reader of the avaricious addressee in the first octet. As the refrain ensues, the reader and/or the addressee is/are urged not to do/say anything: "But let them be," says the refrain's beginning. The exiles are then said to be dead and gone and to be "with O'Leary in the grave."

Now, if this shift in the refrain is meant to accomplish the consolation stage of the elegy, then consolation is here dubious. Nothing could prove whether the poet thinks it not due punishment for the nationalists to meet such a fate; "Let them be" would, in this case, become synonymous with "It serves them right." After all, they are said to have grown madly brave and to have weighed so lightly what they gave. If there is any consolation in the final lines, it should be in the substitution of Romantic Ireland by "they", thus suggesting their having been the very embodiment of the ideal Romantic Ireland. Thus idolized, these dead nationalists are attributed the glory and magnificence of heroes. Yet, this remains only hypothetical as the lines, in feigning closure, resist any categorical commitment (judged) undue.

### **Conclusion**

Whether read as a poem, an elegy (a melancholy poem comprising the traditional three stages of loss), or as a generic hybrid for the many aspects of deviation it shows – aspects which would often invite utter reconsideration of its generic identity – "September 1913" remains strategically sneaky. It materialises Yeats's will to stay both detached and nationalist, the very embodiment of his supple (nationalist) engagement. This strategy, so to speak, guarantees the pleasure of the distant/fake engagement Yeats the poet of masks prefers and the text's permeability as it sets out to fit in with a changing mainstream attitude to Romantic nationalism.



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